

CELEBRATING 75 YEARS!

REACHING OUT, TOUCHING LIVES!

Continuing a history of innovation and excellence



Operation of War Memorial Stadium was assigned to the Recreation Commission in 1933, the year the group was formed.



Photos courtesy of Greensboro Parks & Recreation Department
An early playground serves area children.



Western Electric employees' children try out a miniature train during an annual picnic in Country Park on Aug. 17, 1952.

New services, facilities focus of future plans

BY THE NUMBERS

The Greensboro Parks & Recreation Department manages more than 170 parks, gardens and special facilities, including:

- 3,500 acres (approximately) of parks and green space
- 80 miles (approximately) of trails
- 43 neighborhood parks
- 7 regional parks
- 2 historic parks
- 3 watershed parks
- 3 public gardens
- 10 recreation centers
- 8 pool facilities
- 5 tennis centers
- 4 cemeteries
- 1 farmers' market

PARKS & RECREATION COMMISSIONERS

Rose Marie Ponton,
chairwoman
Marc Bush
Ken Free Sr.
Lori Galbreath
David Hoggard
Carl Brower Jr.
Paul Brown
City Council liaison:
Dr. Trudy Wade

Source: www.greensboro-nc.gov/leisure

By NICHOLAS BROWN
Special to the News & Record

The department that puts the "green" in Greensboro just marked its 75th birthday, and despite the current recession, Greensboro Parks & Recreation Department's future looks bright.

The history of the department that's heralding its anniversary with the theme "Reaching Out, Touching Lives!" is marked by generous local support and a continuity from being led by only four directors. They have heeded residents' wishes, adhered to a policy of inclusion and nurtured relationships with individuals and dozens of partners.

They've also capitalized on funding from individuals, families, organizations and government sources, when it was available. The result has been steady progress from a humble beginning in the Great Depression era to a wide range of nationally recognized efforts in recent years.

It started in 1933 when City Council created the Recreation Commission, which helped form the Parks & Recreation Department. Daniel R. Neal became the first full-time recreation director.

During Neal's 10-year tenure, the department began to acquire land. On July 4, 1934, Country Park opened, with work supported by the Depression-era Civil Works Administration and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration.

Also under Neal's watch, adult softball was initiated and the department opened a pool, school centers, a community center, playgrounds, softball fields, tennis courts, wading pools, picnic areas, shelters and Gillespie Golf Course.

In 1943, Oka T. Hester became the second director of what was then

the Greensboro Parks & Recreation Commission. Hester had joined the recreation staff in January 1934.

The recreation budget grew from \$3,000 in 1933 to more than \$4.5 million in 1977, when Hester retired and a regional park was named in his honor.

Current director Bonnie C. Kuester recalls that "Oka was a great personality and a great politician. He had a good product to sell, but he also laid the groundwork for what we could become."

Hester advocated neighborhood parks, which he helped develop. During the 1960s more than 30 parcels were purchased; today there are 43 neighborhood parks, a "green" attribute for which Greensboro is known.

Also under Hester's tenure, the Greensboro Youth Council (GYC) was formed in 1962. The GYC, heralded by Parks & Recreation as the first of its kind in the country, is among the longest-running youth leadership programs.

Hester also helped the department develop large projects such as regional parks.

- Hagan-Stone Park opened in 1964.
- Bryan Park opened in 1974 as a premier golf and recreational facility.

- In 1976, Bicentennial Garden was given to the city by Greensboro Beautiful.

"Oka was a proponent of anything that could be parks and recreation," Kuester noted. "And he was very supportive of it ... a lot of it was based on his relationships with people who were willing to work with him or willing to give the land."

Hester died about a year after he retired. His successor, Roger K. Brown, continued the momentum during his 15-year tenure, helping

build a national reputation.

"Roger was very supportive of staff and growing programs," Kuester noted. In the 1970s and 1980s, money was available for parks development, especially federal dollars, and Brown and his staff went after it. "He was very, very well-known nationally and in professional organizations, and he brought a lot of honor to the community," Kuester said of her predecessor, now living in Oregon.

During Brown's tenure, the nationally known soccer complex at Bryan Park opened in 1986. Kuester called the complex "one of the finest soccer facilities in the country."

In 1979 and 1987 the department won National Gold Medals awarded by the National Sporting Goods Association's Sports Foundation Inc. for excellence in parks and recreation administration. The foundation awarded the department a third gold medal in 2002.

Greensboro's success in capturing this award stems from the Parks & Recreation Department's inclusive philosophy. Kuester and Candice Bruton, the department's planning division manager, note that seeking residents' input and fostering dozens of partnerships with private groups, organizations and government agencies are crucial to the department's continued success.

Keeping in touch with residents is vital, Bruton says. "It is important because we work for the citizens of Greensboro. So it's important for us to know that what we're doing really reflects what the needs of citizens are."

Kuester, 65, became director in 1992. A Greensboro native, she is a 41-year department veteran. She oversees an array of recreational, leisure

GIFTS OF TIME

Each year the Greensboro Parks & Recreation Department benefits from the services of about 1,220 volunteers who contribute 30,735 hours, which represents an estimated value of \$307,350.

Services completed by volunteers can be classified into four major areas:

- Program leadership
- Public relations/promotion and education
- Clerical services
- Advisory councils

Responsibilities vary from botanical garden volunteer, to golf assistant, to coach for youth football or basketball leagues.

Interested in finding out more? All volunteers must complete an application, release of liability and a volunteer code of ethics. Depending on the volunteer assignment, other forms may be required. The department also requires a criminal background check on volunteers before they can be placed.

For more information about volunteer opportunities, call 373-2574 or visit www.greensboro-nc.gov/departments/Parks/Volunteer+Opportunities/.

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